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Signals from Stalin: The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union in the Midst of the Soviet-Finnish War, 1939-40

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The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) occupies very little space in the historiography of Stalin's Russia. Yet from newly uncovered documents held within the Soviet leader's personal archive, it is clear that TASS began to play a significant role in the mechanics of the Stalinist state by the end of the 1930s. The catalyst was the turbulent and rapidly shifting nature of events witnessed in this period. Coinciding with the Red Army's faltering record in its war with Finland, various strategies of crisis-management, censorship, and control were employed by the Kremlin in an attempt to manage how news from the Finnish front spread amongst audiences at home and abroad. This paper will trace how, from the early stages of the relationship between the Telegraph Agency leadership and Stalin, the responsibilities of TASS became broader and more rigorously exploited. Eventually emerging as a global mouthpiece, pseudo-espionage network, tool of foreign policy, and versatile propaganda weapon for the Soviet Union, it was employed by a regime desperate to limit the damage caused by global condemnation of the invasion and the faltering position of the Communist International.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 December 1939, Yakov Semyonovich Khavinson entered the Kremlin apartment of Joseph Stalin. Alongside Khavinson's name (incorrectly entered into the day's meeting register) their encounter is recorded as lasting a matter of minutes;¹ it hardly registers as a significant episode in the context of the period. After carving up Central and Eastern Europe with Nazi Germany at the diplomatic table, the Soviet Union was freshly embroiled in an unexpected war with Finland. Stalin was far more likely to be found in attendance with his 'inner circle' than some lower level apparatchik.² Yet Khavinson's role as head of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) placed him in a vital position, albeit unacknowledged publicly at the time or subsequently in the historiography of the period. Understanding the role that TASS began to play in the machinery of the Stalinist state offers a unique opportunity to shed new light on its form and function at the end of the 1930s. This paper will demonstrate how Stalin relied increasingly on TASS and the expanding information network coordinated by its Moscow offices in various aspects of crisis management, censorship, and control.

In recent years a more complete and complex picture of the inter-related nature of Soviet politics, propaganda, and mass media has emerged from the

¹ *Na Priyomye u Stalina: Tetradi (Zhurnali) Zapisei Lits Prinyatikh I.V. Stalinim, 1924–1953 gg.*, ed. by Anatolii Aleksandrovich Chernobaev (Moscow: 2010), p. 283. Among earlier notes passed between their offices it is evident that Stalin had neglected to commit the correct spelling to memory. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 61.

² *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Vol. 1. Commissar (1918-1945)*, ed. by Sergei Khrushchev (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), p. 249.

archives. The ‘totalizing’ aims of the regime did not achieve total results.³ Public opinion has been shown to be more varied, dynamic, and independent in thought and idea than the Party desired.⁴ The ‘propaganda state’ struggled through crises that were both self-inflicted and the result of historical contingency.⁵ My own research supports these conclusions while offering new evidence through the exploration of an over-looked institution and a neglected episode in Soviet history. The information TASS collected, how it was exploited by Stalin and the regime, and the way the Soviet public engaged with it offers an opportunity to study the period from above and below and especially the connections in-between.

Furthermore, this paper is less concerned with the ideas and ideology that the Soviet regime attempted to propagate than the rapidly changing nature of events that repeatedly undermined the formulation of any coherent message on the Soviet-Finnish War. Official news of these events versus popular understanding of them reiterates that the Soviet Union was by no means closed to the outside world.⁶ Consideration of how TASS formed part of the regime’s response to this disparity allows a view of the mechanics of the Soviet regime from the Kremlin offices of Joseph Stalin, to the copy desk of *Pravda*, via a global information network experiencing a dramatic expansion of its role and responsibilities. The catalyst for this was war in Europe and the particular challenges faced by the Soviet Union during its conflict with Finland. The situation rapidly turned into one of public humiliation for the Soviet forces at the front and popular condemnation by audiences abroad.⁷ As a result, TASS quickly began to expand its role, becoming a global mouthpiece, pseudo-espionage network, tool of foreign policy, and versatile propaganda weapon for the Stalinist regime.

ESTABLISHING A MEDIA MONOPOLY

The need for effective control over the dissemination of Soviet news led the Politburo to establish the Central all-Union Wire Service in July 1924. TASS was expected to strictly adhere to the official Party line through ‘the achievement of the necessary...control over and concentration of all information in one general direction.’⁸ By the end of the decade it had been granted a monopoly over the

³ Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana, 2000), pp. 1-3.

⁴ Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 183.

⁵ Matthew Lenoe, ‘NEP Newspapers and the Origins of Soviet Information Rationing’, *Russian Review*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2003), pp. 614-636. Brandenberger characterises the latter part of the 1930s as beset by crises after the Terror’s undermining of the Party’s useable past. From a perpetual position of weakness, it was forced to seek ad-hoc responses to events rather than allowing long-term ideological aims to be fulfilled. David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror Under Stalin, 1927-1941* (London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁶ *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, ed. by Andrei Sakharov, Vladimir Khristoforov, and Timo Vihavainen (Moscow: 2009).

⁷ For a full account of the military dynamics of the conflict see: Carl Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939-40* (London: Portland, OR, 1997).

⁸ Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 20.

distribution of global news within the USSR and responsibility for the production of all international and domestic Soviet news.⁹ TASS provided a constant feed of press reports from outside the Soviet Union, which its offices channelled to the Party press and on occasion, directly to Stalin. While this was not a new phenomenon by the end of the 1930s (the New York office sent breaking news reports of his interview as leader of the Soviet Union in 1926¹⁰), how Stalin valued TASS and the scope of the organization's operations would grow exponentially with the outbreak of war in Europe and the breakdown in relations with Finland.

The information TASS provided dominated newspapers at the central and provincial levels. Those who worked within its network and in the press acknowledged the extent to which content was dependent on its news distribution. This included detailed instructions about the format in which such information should appear and even which page it should occupy.¹¹ However, not all the information collected was intended for public consumption:

Only a small part of the material gathered by TASS is given to the press. Most of the material goes to the CC [Central Committee] or the NKVD. Twice a month the foreign section of TASS prepares an information bulletin on the international situation. Those pages of the bulletin which are printed on red paper go only to the Politburo and the others, printed on blue, go to members of the CC and to top officials. About half the material in the newspapers comes from TASS.¹²

As an important institution handling such highly sensitive material, TASS required management by a figure that could be trusted to strictly adhere to the Party line. Accordingly, Khavinson rose to take charge of the Telegraph Agency at the height of the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. He remains an allusive figure within the archives and details of his early career are scarce. Nevertheless, it is clear he profited from (if not engineered) the demise of his predecessor Iakov Doletskii, who was purged in 1937.¹³ Khavinson had already shown his loyalty to Stalin, blasting Doletskii's management as a hotbed of fascist intrigue and influence.¹⁴ He now aimed to further prove his credentials by weeding out suspicious elements within the organization by providing a systematic overview of all agents operating abroad within the TASS network. The relative ambivalence displayed by Stalin delegating

⁹ Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fol. 558, op. 11, d. 726, ll. 137-138. The accompanying letter was written by New York bureau chief Kenneth Durant, who had joined the agency in 1922. At the outbreak of the Soviet-Finnish war and for the duration of hostilities he continued to occupy this post. See The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fol. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, l. 233.

¹¹ Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS), schedule B, vol. 6, case 359, p. 4. <<http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/index.html>> [accessed 22 April 2012]. A number of interviews conducted by the Harvard Project of Soviet émigrés include those with experience in the press and Telegraph Agency. They offer an invaluable degree of detail regarding the domestic activities of TASS throughout the 1930s and 1940s and the supervisory role it played in the Soviet media.

¹² HPSSS, schedule B, vol. 6, case 359, p. 7.

¹³ With thanks to Christopher Stolarski (John Hopkins University) for the following reference: RGASPI, fol. 82, op. 2, d. 907, ll. 13-15.

¹⁴ RGASPI, fol. 82, op. 2, d. 907, l. 15.

responsibility to Malenkov suggests that, at this stage, TASS was still only operating on the periphery of his radar.¹⁵

SIGNALS FROM STALIN

Khavinson persevered, seeking to cement his position through diligent work and careful attention to the signals he received from the Kremlin. Stalin's notes and correspondence testify that the General Secretary was often a man of few words. Given the sheer volume of material that he processed on a daily basis, the need for brevity is understandable. Khavinson's skill was in anticipating those topics in the foreign press that caught Stalin's attention. When any such signal was forthcoming, Khavinson pressed hard on his subordinates abroad to deliver further material. Therefore, a study of the interactions between Khavinson and Stalin, as well as Khavinson and his agents abroad, is essential to understanding how TASS's role developed at the end of the 1930s.

The bulletins Stalin received from Khavinson's offices offered a window into the shifting nature of global politics. They contributed to Stalin's views on foreign policy and, from his own notes in the marginalia, they help us to understand his political preoccupations at the time. Prior to the outbreak of war with Finland, developments were moving faster than the international community could follow. Foreign journalists' attempts to untangle the diplomatic web between Hitler and Stalin only strengthened the latter's already confident outlook.¹⁶ As Stalin digested news from the international press, he privately ridiculed the 'naivety' of foreign reporters, amused by their inability to effectively trace the course Eastern Europe was taking under the direction of its two new masters.¹⁷

Amidst the distrust and hostility bred by Stalin's decision to reach an accord with Germany in August 1939, the Kremlin maintained a watchful eye over how the rest of the world perceived the situation. In the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs addressed the Supreme Soviet on the direction of Soviet policy. Molotov's speech to the Extraordinary Fifth Session of the Supreme Soviet on 31 October – published in its entirety across the Central Party press the following day – spoke in particular of the 'special character' of relations with Finland. Negotiations between the two countries were still in progress. Molotov's response to the interference of the US government and negative foreign press on the advancement of talks reveals the care taken by the Soviet government to monitor the mood of the international community.¹⁸

¹⁵ RGASPI, fol. 83, op. 1, d. 89, ll. 8-10. Online transcript, *Fond Alexandra N. Yakovleva* <<http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1015846>> [accessed 22 April 2012].

¹⁶ See Stalin's comments regarding the Baltic States. *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, ed. by Ivo Banac (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 120.

¹⁷ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, ll. 63-66, 75. This commentary is found written by hand in the marginalia of TASS bulletins forwarded to Stalin. Clearly both informative and amusing for the General Secretary, as the occasions where he simply scrawled 'Ha, ha' in pencil testify. This included reports of Hitler's impending visit to Moscow after the ratification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

¹⁸ 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 31 October 1939'

<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1940/peace.htm>> [accessed 7 April 2011].

The Soviet government was not operating in a bubble; public statements of this nature were carefully traced by TASS for their reception outside the USSR.¹⁹ In its haste to present the Soviet line to the world, the Moscow office had relayed the entire speech by telegraph to Reuters in London. Reuters' response was a polite reminder of the need for brevity and clarity in transmissions.²⁰ Naturally, the priorities of these two organizations were not aligned. Moscow's interest in ensuring that its voice was heard in the face of widespread anti-Soviet sentiment would continue to take priority over any respect for proper protocol concerning the dissemination of global news.²¹

Moscow was privy to a huge network of information via TASS's collection of material on domestic and international developments. The articles held in its archive relating to Finland between January and March 1940 cover nearly 150 pages of newsprint.²² The sources that passed directly to Stalin's desk ensured that he was well informed of the international arena and foreign perceptions of the USSR. This careful management of the public dissemination of information also supported his policy decisions and corrects past assessments of Stalin's passive approach to foreign affairs.²³ The evidence from TASS, in addition to material recently translated to English, demonstrates that 'even in the early 1930s Stalin followed and took decisions on Soviet foreign relations, on matters both large and small'.²⁴

Stalin had an interest in the reports from TASS beyond policy-making. Stalin selected, edited, and censored these reports, and as a consequence, these documents became an important tool in manufacturing a particular view of the outside world for the Soviet readership. To follow one example, throughout the 1930s the NKVD often reiterated the danger posed by Germany and the links it continued to foster with Leningrad's Finnish neighbours.²⁵ These channels ran directly to Stalin and his 'inner circle'. He could then decide when and how that information would be disseminated to the public. Furthermore, Stalin had a direct hand in publishing a news report on the strategic efforts pursued by Germany to secure bases along the Gulf of Finland at the start of 1939. News of the bases was not clearly reported in the Soviet press, but instead, carefully edited to avoid generating popular fear over the Finns' possession of potential 'bridgeheads' for assault. Attention was focused instead on portraying Germany and Finland as potential bedfellows.²⁶

This is just one of many examples of how Stalin attempted to utilize the back pages of the press (where TASS's reports were generally concentrated) to manipulate public opinion. By the end of the 1930s, he repeatedly resorted to micro-managing the dissemination of news articles on sensitive areas of global and Soviet foreign

¹⁹ See, for example, GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, l. 76; d. 1212, ll. 48-49.

²⁰ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, l. 37.

²¹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, ll. 15, 18, 19.

²² GARF, fol. 4459, op. 28, d. 395, ll. 1-147.

²³ Jonathan Haslam, *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1930-33: The Impact of the Depression* (London: Basingstoke, 1983), p. 18.

²⁴ *The Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence, 1931-36*, ed. by Robert W. Davies, O. V. Khlevniuk, and E. A. Rees (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 14.

²⁵ *Zimniaia Voina 1939-1940 gg. v Dokumentakh NKVD*, comp. by Sergei Bernyev and Alexander Ruspasov (St. Petersburg: 2010), pp.85-112. See also, *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, pp. 150-151.

²⁶ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, ll. 24-25; *Izvestiia*, 18 Jan. 1939.

affairs. He blocked those that he felt could be detrimental to public opinion and sought to control access to news from the outside world. Such direct intervention reflects the importance placed in the press for the Party's propaganda efforts. Through the late 1930s and the early 1940s, it 'became the primary means of propaganda in the Soviet Union'. On 14 November 1938 the Central Committee issued a directive declaring:

In Marxist-Leninist propaganda, the decisive weapon is the press: magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets. Oral propaganda can only play a secondary role in this struggle. The press offers an opportunity to make this or that truth into an immediate possession of all people in society, and it is therefore stronger than oral propaganda.²⁷

In contrast, earlier in the decade Stalin's complaints to close associates about the inadequacies of the *Pravda* editorial board reflected certain limits to his reach.²⁸ This frustration at the newsroom's failure to anticipate the correct line likely contributed to TASS's increasingly vital role in screening, censoring, and distributing material that allowed uniform presentation of news across the Soviet Union.²⁹ With the archives of *Pravda* still unavailable, Stalin's willingness to influence the day-to-day operations of the central Party press offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the mechanics of a major state organ.

Beyond Stalin's hands-on role, he also displayed a subtlety in approach. Stalin was less concerned with constructing an 'immediate' truth than shifting policy, and as a result, the orientation of the Party line was diffused more gradually among the readership. Evidence includes his careful exposé of relations between Germany and France as the Soviet Union pursued negotiations with both in the spring and summer of 1939. Stalin first selected a fairly innocuous article on French iron ore exports to Germany, which he meticulously edited before its placement in *Pravda* on 28 June. Appearing alongside a report on foreign spies operating in France, it offered a more neutral view of countries willing to deal with Nazi Germany while simultaneously undermining the position of France in the public eye. The timing of these articles anticipated the reverse in policy towards reconciliation with Hitler that took place after the repeated failure to reach agreement with Britain and France.³⁰ After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August, the public face of friendly relations with fascist Germany had to be handled with a new sensitivity. The Party quickly adhered to the new line, as evidenced by Molotov's speech to the Supreme Soviet. Molotov now opted to reference only an increase in the 'amount of

²⁷ Ewa Thompson, 'Nationalist Propaganda in the Soviet Russian Press, 1939-1941', *Slavic Review*, vol. 50, no. 2 (1991), p. 387.

²⁸ 'Letter 66 (13 September 1930)', *Stalin's Letters to Molotov 1925-1936*, ed. by Lars Lih, Oleg Naumov, Oleg Khlevniuk (London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 215. See also: *Stalin-Kaganovich Correspondence*, Letter 158 (6 Sep. 1936), pp. 349-350.

²⁹ 'TASS would indicate that certain types of material could not be published – this happened after the pact with Germany in 1939, when TASS instructed newspapers to pull out all anti-German items.' HPSSS, schedule B, vol. 6, case 359, p. 4.

³⁰ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 61. See also: *Pravda*, 28 June 1939, p. 5.

outside influence on the part of third powers' over Finland, while neglecting to name Germany.³¹

Evidence from post-war interviews suggests these efforts were not wasted on a disinterested readership but found many engaged citizens seeking to understand foreign affairs and the shifts in Soviet policy signalled by TASS. Alongside a healthy dose of scepticism, without knowledge of Stalin's personal intervention, some even considered themselves adept at 'reading between the lines' and anticipating those shifts independently, without realising the guiding hand of Stalin extended even to these minute details:

When I read news of international events, I read between the lines. I suppose I could say that I liked to read international news most of all, especially the articles that were buried at the bottoms of the pages. I liked to read what they called 'telegrams from abroad', which were the latest communications from the branches of TASS in foreign countries...When I read these articles, I could see in what light the government regarded foreign events, and from that I could judge for myself what was the matter.³²

Unfortunately for Stalin, his influence over the progress of events on which TASS reported was not so extensive. The 'peaceful' path of diplomacy that engineered agreements with the Baltic countries did not prove effective where the Finnish government was concerned.³³ By mid-October the progress of diplomatic talks, or lack thereof, was already increasingly absent from the press. Limiting coverage to the back page foreign press clippings from TASS, Stalin personally censored reports on the negotiations, despite a relatively optimistic treatment of events.³⁴ The third round of talks the following month again failed to produce a compromise that suited both governments. Stalin's involvement in the negotiation process caused his reluctance to draw unnecessary attention to the ongoing failure to reach an agreement with Helsinki. This mirrored a more general aversion to issue public statements on the turbulent theatre of war on the continent. His conversations with Georgi Dimitrov made it clear that the recent shift from an 'anti-Fascist' to 'anti-imperialist' line had not been a smooth transition for the Communist International (Comintern).³⁵

CRISIS AMONGST THE COMINTERN

The decline of the Comintern witnessed in this period is essential to understanding the increasing reliance on TASS for dissemination of the Party line. Behind the scenes its prominence rapidly diminished after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Dimitrov later revealed to Milovan Djilas that the idea of dissolving

³¹ 'Soviet Peace Policy – Speech Delivered on 31 October 1939'

<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/molotov/1940/peace.htm>> [Accessed 7 April 2011].

³² HPSSS, schedule A, vol. 15, case 305, p. 58.

³³ All three Baltic States had capitulated within a fortnight of each other. Estonia's signature was secured on 28 September, Latvia on 5 October, and Lithuania on 10 October.

³⁴ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 75.

³⁵ *Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934-1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives*, ed. by Alexander Dallin and Fridrikh Firsov (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 163-165.

the Comintern first arose following the annexation of the Baltic States. However this was postponed to avoid giving the impression it resulted from German pressure.³⁶ Stalin no longer felt duty bound to respond to the telephone calls of Dimitrov and took care to maintain a tight leash over the Executive Committee's insistence on publishing official statements on the war in Europe.³⁷ Further commentary was kept to a minimum; Dimitrov even ordered the retraction of public comments made by Mao Tse-tung in support of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the precedent it set for Soviet intervention in China. Mao learned his lesson and would later keep any statement of support for the war with Finland to a secret directive.³⁸

Any shift in responsibility between the two organizations would prove to be far from a complete transition, with Moscow continuing to operate on an ad-hoc basis throughout the crisis period. The British example provides an indication of just how challenging the scenario was for the satellite parties loyal to the USSR. Here, the inadequacy of direction from the centre, vis-à-vis Moscow, undermined attempts to present the Kremlin's official line and counter-act widespread criticism of the Red Army's invasion of Finland.

The disparity between the direction of TASS and the Comintern was likely to have been a contributory factor for the tumultuous switch to an 'anti-imperialist' stance caused by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Stalin first signalled the new 'anti-imperialist' line to Dimitrov at a meeting on 7 September 1939. Just two days later, the Comintern secretaries approved a directive, which instructed all communist parties to immediately correct their political standpoint.³⁹ However, the delay in receiving this directive meant that General Secretary Harry Pollitt's first signal of the change arrived via a press telegram on 14 September. The conflict was now described as 'a robber war kindled from all sides by the hands of two imperialist groups of powers'.⁴⁰ He opted to suppress the press telegram, given its wholesale contradiction of the 'anti-Fascist' stance maintained by the Party.⁴¹ His commitment to the old line proved to be an error of judgement for those members of the Party leadership who sided with him. Rajani Palme Dutt, quicker to anticipate the change, interpreted the telegram as an indication of the new mood in Moscow. When the same instructions from the Comintern arrived with Dave Springhall's return from the Soviet capital on 25 September, Pollitt's mistake was clear.⁴² Both Pollitt and James Campbell, editor of the CPBG newspaper *The Daily Worker*, were forced to step down and publicly recant their mistakes to the Party.⁴³

³⁶ Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. by Michael Petrovich (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 34-35.

³⁷ *Diary of Dimitrov*, pp. 119-121.

³⁸ Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2006), pp. 216-217.

³⁹ Monty Johnstone, 'The CPGB, The Comintern and The War, 1939-1941: Filling In The Blank Spots', *Science & Society*, 61, 1 (Spring 1997), p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Unfortunately only a typed copy of this telegram with no indication of its source remains in Harry Pollitt's papers at the Labour History Archive, Manchester.

⁴¹ *About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War*, ed. by Francis King and George Matthews (London: Lawrence & Wishar, 1990), p.24.

⁴² Johnstone, 'The CPGB, The Comintern And The War', p. 30.

⁴³ Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University, 2000), pp. 258-261.

The outbreak of war with Finland on 30 November dealt a further blow at a time when the CPGB desperately needed the opportunity to rally support, reassert discipline, and circulate the new 'anti-imperialist' line. After their initial mistake the Central Committee, with Dutt at its head, was eager to prove their political credentials to Moscow. Furthermore, as a valuable source of Soviet friendly print harvested by TASS, Moscow would maintain pressure on its agents in London to provide a constant stream of material from the CPGB press.⁴⁴ *The Daily Worker* now performed editorial somersaults to avoid alienating itself from Moscow's presentation of the fighting in Finland. Headlines were changed between morning and evening editions to avoid any insinuation of Soviet aggression or Moscow's engineering of the sudden emergence of Kuusinen's 'People's Government'.⁴⁵ The situation nearly became farcical in the days following the invasion. In a quick succession of headlining stories, the paper leapt at the chance to celebrate 'uprising' in Finland and the foundation of the 'People's Government' on Saturday, 2 December, only to withdraw this impression from the late edition. Having concluded that such a development needed a more popular spin, its place was taken by the declaration of a 'call for popular government' expressed by the Finnish communists.⁴⁶ With no Sunday edition, the writers returned on Monday, 4 December with news of the weekend's events and once more joyfully acknowledged the new 'People's Government', 'formed in Terojoki [sic] on Friday night'.⁴⁷

With the Comintern under gagging orders, signals from TASS communiqués became the best hope for satellite parties to anticipate the Moscow line. Unfortunately this was an imperfect solution due to the rapidly changing nature of events in Finland. Editors had to hope a telegram would not later be retracted or information withdrawn after transmission, since such practices had previously existed.

During the Yezhoshchina, the only news printed about the purges came from TASS. At the big trials only TASS and *Pravda* journalists were present. Sometimes TASS sends foreign news on the teletype and two hours later sends instructions to pull the news out.⁴⁸

With Europe at war, significant breakdowns in available channels of communication emerged during the fighting in Finland. Furthermore, the recourse of outdated and politically naive calls to a communist friendly society in the country would fail to generate the revolutionary upsurge that Stalin hoped for.

Nevertheless, the position of TASS and the increasing profile of Khavinson were consolidated in the aftermath of the Red Army's invasion. On 1 December Khavinson enjoyed his first audience with the General Secretary. The following day he returned to Stalin's office in the midst of the staged signing of a treaty on mutual assistance and friendship between the Soviet Union and the 'Finnish Democratic

⁴⁴ GARF, fol. 4459, op.11, d. 1166, l. 76.

⁴⁵ *Daily Worker*, 1 Nov. 1939; 4 Nov. 1939; 28 Nov. 1939; 29 Nov. 1939; 4 Dec. 1939.

⁴⁶ *Daily Worker*, 29 Nov. 1939.

⁴⁷ *Daily Worker*, 4 Dec. 1939.

⁴⁸ HPSSS, schedule B, vol. 6, case 606, p. 13.

Republic'.⁴⁹ Khavinson's witnessing, however brief, of Stalin's unfolding propaganda campaign saw him ideally placed to anticipate the importance Stalin would now give to public perceptions of the conflict.⁵⁰

The backlash was almost immediate, and it was Khavinson who was on hand to report directly to the General Secretary. In a hastily-forwarded memo to Stalin and Molotov, an article by the Russian émigré communist and staunch anti-Stalinist Boris Souvarine provided a detailed portrait of Otto Kuusinen and his relations with the Kremlin. Published in Paris just two days after the signing of the mutual assistance treaty with Kuusinen's puppet administration, it shattered any hopes that Stalin might have harboured for a positive reception to this thinly veiled publicity stunt.⁵¹ Any reference to Finland's new 'People's Government' rapidly fell from the pages of the Soviet press. As quickly as Kuusinen appeared in the public eye, he disappeared. His government's laudation of Stalin during the sixtieth birthday celebrations was lost in a sea of carefully managed dedications, biographical notes, and congratulatory remarks. On 24 December, after its translation from Finnish, it was sent to Andrei Zhdanov for review. *Pravda* would only find space for it the following week, tucked away on page three.⁵²

The overall impression is of a regime averse to perpetuating negative press, while also being ill equipped to stop it. Rather than fabricate a positive spin, the regime responded with a media blackout. The sudden shift in the case of the 'People's Government' left many questions regarding the fate of Kuusinen and his colleagues unanswered. Following the end of hostilities, the Leningrad district continued to monitor public remarks regarding the war, and a summary of those issues left unresolved since the peace signing was publicly announced. Some examples of comments and public remarks which Zhdanov highlighted on receiving the report are: 'What will be done now with the People's Government of Finland?'; 'Why is the agreement concluded without terminating the People's Government?'; 'Where is Kuusinen now?'

This was not the only public relations blunder Stalin made in the course of the war. On the 8 December word reached TASS from their Stockholm office of a press report detailing German and Italian supply of arms to Finland. Forwarded directly to Stalin, his manipulation of the original text is marked by its simplicity:

[Original] German and Italian arms deliveries to Finland

[Edited] Germany and Italy supplying arms to Finland?⁵³

Rather than make an explicit statement linking the Axis powers to Finland, a subtle question mark hangs over the rumours of trade relations supporting the Finnish defence forces. Its purpose was to strengthen the vision of Finland being influenced by the anti-Soviet aspirations of European nations. Moscow's attempt to portray the

⁴⁹ *Na Priyomye u Stalina*, p. 283.

⁵⁰ Stalin personally edited the agreement signed by both sides before its publication in the press. See: RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 1123, ll. 41-51. Online transcript, *Fond Alexandra N. Yakovleva* <<http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1015989>> [accessed 22 April 2012].

⁵¹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 38, d. 97, ll. 10-12.

⁵² RGASPI, fol. 77, op. 4, d. 47, ll. 26-31; *Pravda*, 28 Dec. 1939.

⁵³ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 84.

war as an international conflict beyond the David and Goliath scenario that was swiftly emerging, without making explicit accusations that could alienate Moscow from Berlin and Rome. The article appeared in *Pravda* two days later, published alongside an ambiguous reference to the British government's failure to confirm reports from Stockholm that Finland had placed an order for one hundred planes.⁵⁴ Unfortunately for Stalin, the Germans still took offence, and Hitler's foreign minister Ribbentrop immediately issued a rebuff to any insinuations the article made.

I should be grateful if the Russian Government would cause the TASS agency, before releasing such reports in the future, first to get in touch either with the German Embassy in Moscow or with Berlin, in order that such unpleasant incidents might be avoided.⁵⁵

The interplay between politics, propaganda, and the press could not be more explicit. Moscow, once again, had to acquiesce with the increasing isolation of the Soviet Union in global politics after the diplomatic gains it had achieved in the 1930s. Shortly after this episode, the Soviet Union found itself expelled from the League of Nations.⁵⁶ By the time fighting drew to a close in March, the Red Army was nearly faced with the prospect of fighting French and British troops sent to the Finns aid.⁵⁷ With the Kremlin's primary interest in avoiding being drawn into another world war, Stalin had to tread more carefully and keep Finland out of the public eye.

MOSCOW, LONDON, AND NEW YORK

Meanwhile, with the increased responsibility enjoyed by Khavinson also came pressure to provide a constant stream of content from agents abroad. They sought material that offered widespread coverage of events both domestically and around the globe, with insights into the politics, people, and progress of the capitalist and developing world. The London and the New York TASS offices made it clear that they were not prepared for an increase in workload. Both suffered from limited resources and a host of communication breakdowns that emanated from attempts to maintain a line to Moscow geographically across the European theatre of war.

In September 1939, the New York office had been ordered to transform its operation from a nine-hour day to a twenty-four hour rolling news service.⁵⁸ Moscow showed little sympathy for the strain this put on Kenneth Durant and his tiny staff before the changeover. Durant's correspondence with Khavinson stresses the pressure they were under and the exhausting efforts required to make this

⁵⁴ *Pravda*, 10 Dec. 1939.

⁵⁵ 'Memorandum by the Reich Foreign Minister, 11 December 1939' <<http://www.histdoc.net/history/NaSo1939-12-11.html>> [Accessed 12 April 2011].

⁵⁶ The League of Nations reached its decision on 14 December. The following day *Pravda* made reference to the meeting without publishing its final verdict. This was carefully buried at the bottom of an article titled, 'The League of Nations is in the service of Anglo-French Military Bloc', which accused the two nations of leading the campaign against the Soviet Union. *Pravda*, 15 Dec. 1939, p. 5.

⁵⁷ 'French Aid to Finland: Daladier's Statement, Paris, March 12, 1940' <<http://www.histdoc.net/history/BRFO1940-03-12.html>> [Accessed 18 April 2011].

⁵⁸ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 130-131.

shift.⁵⁹ Under Stalin's shadow, Khavinson was unlikely to accept anything short of a Stakhanovite approach to targets. Later correspondence makes it clear fundamental differences in the outlook of both managers existed regarding what constituted normal, humane work-conditions.⁶⁰

Both London and New York experienced periodic disruptions in communication with Moscow. The first significant obstacle was the establishment of a British blockade on Germany that interfered with efforts to ship mail to the Soviet Union. Never a quick means of contact, it put further strain on telegraph operators to provide both daily updates and communicate the appeals from London and New York for further instruction.⁶¹ By the time war with Finland had broken out, events were moving too quickly to anticipate the Moscow line. Primacy was instead given to channels of information travelling to the centre over distribution of regular communiqués from Moscow for its agents abroad.

Many of the subjects mentioned in your letter (example: reaction of workers to committee of aid to White Finland) seem proper subjects for radio and cable report, rather than the present slow mail. Events move too rapidly. The ordinary mails take from three to six weeks from New York to Moscow.⁶²

Rather than giving them free reign to switch transmission over to radio and cable, Khavinson repeatedly chastised the London bureau for exceeding its telegram quota.⁶³ There was a notable drop in communication between London and Moscow that followed the invasion of Finland. It cannot be fully accounted for by the limitations imposed by the British Navy and the intermittent weather and geography-related problems, which affected radio channels. TASS was facing the same problem as the Soviet media in general. The agency needed to limit the negative press the war received, but it hesitated over the best way to achieve this.

Khavinson's earlier audiences with Stalin were not repeated. Instead the General Secretary signalled what else the offices abroad should prioritize in global news and intelligence gathering. For New York, the penetration of South America became a task that bore little relation to the realities of available resources. Direction undoubtedly came from Stalin who had initially highlighted the issue of German radio broadcasts in Latin America and consequently, authorized publishing information about the broadcasts after receiving a TASS bulletin from New York in February 1939.⁶⁴ Durant did his best to explain to Moscow the realities of the North American news service and the limits of his bureau's reach.⁶⁵ That Khavinson pushed the issue more than once suggests this was considered a better use of TASS's time than repeating the English-speaking world's condemnation of the Soviet Union's activity in Finland. It was also a clear indication of the global coverage Moscow expected TASS to develop.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 130-131. (22 Sep. 1939).

⁶⁰ GARF fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 147-148. (17 April 1940).

⁶¹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1079, ll. 157-161.

⁶² GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 210-211.

⁶³ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, l. 90, 100.

⁶⁴ RGASPI, fol. 558, op. 11, d. 207, l. 30.

⁶⁵ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 40-42. (24 Jan. 1940).

⁶⁶ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 66-72.

Finland became the elephant in the room. Moscow was reluctant to draw attention to such a sensitive area of Soviet policy, and its agents abroad avoided tackling the subject without the Kremlin's official line for guidance. It is noticeable how little the topic touched on the few instances of extended dialogue between Moscow, London, and New York during the war. When direction from the centre eventually began to permeate through, it was broad in subject matter, without recourse to specific mention of events in Europe or Finland in particular.⁶⁷

The importance of these channels of information to Moscow was revealed during instances when they broke down. Frantic telegrams were issued to the London bureau and directly to Reuters when its feed was lost.⁶⁸ The disruption of Moscow's regular subscription to *The Daily Worker* and other English news sources resulted in a similar response.⁶⁹ The New York bureau became a pseudo-intelligence network, instructed to provide information on industry, war production, and even the propaganda initiatives of its own government aimed at generating popular support for the European war effort.⁷⁰ The problems the Soviet Union faced in the engendering of uniform public support for its campaign in Finland encouraged Moscow to explore techniques from abroad that might help shape policy at home.

Finally, with the decline in prominence of the Comintern, there was also an interest in TASS taking on a greater role as the official mouthpiece for the regime. However the legal and logistical limitations of its offices abroad were not recognised by the centre when pushing for this additional responsibility. New York's operation as a collector of news for publication in the Soviet Union was legally defined by US law and did not allow TASS to operate as a distributor of Soviet news independently of the established American news agencies.⁷¹ Khavinson raised the question, despite his knowledge of the bureau's hands being tied. He understood the primary concern for the Kremlin was having its voice and particular presentation of the truth heard. On 22 February 1940 his office received a letter from Reuters, regarding a message received by its rival United Press that quoted the 'Official Soviet Agency' as its source. The message contained a statement from Moscow that 'the most decisive battle of the war was imminent round Viipuri,' the result of which was 'Soviet correspondents with the Red Army are predicting success for the Russian troops on or before next Friday'. Reuters expressed concern over why they had not received such a statement. It had appeared in the morning's papers before their offices in London received word. Khavinson dismissed the allegations that it was issued by TASS and blamed delays in communication between Moscow and London for any disruption to the service.⁷² Whether this was simply a bluff on Khavinson's part is unclear, yet it reiterates how Moscow was struggling to engineer a positive spin of the Red Army's record. Ultimately, neither the political climate nor pressures of war permitted the time and resources needed to rectify these existing problems before the hostilities with Finland concluded.

⁶⁷ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 240-242. (27 Feb. 1940).

⁶⁸ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, l. 96; d. 1185, l. 33.

⁶⁹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1166, ll. 76, 87.

⁷⁰ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 66-72, 83-84, 90-91, 116-118.

⁷¹ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1212, ll. 48-49.

⁷² GARF, fol. 4459, op. 11, d. 1185, ll. 7, 15, 18, 19.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Correspondence between TASS and its bureaus in New York and London was not the only place that the topic of Finland was carefully skated around. It was proving, quite simply, too hard a sell. Although there was an attempt to put on a brave face where the Soviet Union's expulsion from the League of Nations was concerned, this should not disguise the fact that the war had quickly slipped from the front pages of the central Soviet press. Within the Party bureaucracy based in the capital, most notably the Department for Propaganda and Agitation, recorded dialogue within its archives showed a striking absence of discussion, let alone even token references to the war.⁷³ The same is true of the censorship offices of Glavlit.⁷⁴ It was not until 22 February that any official limit on publishing material related to the conflict was issued to all sections of the media.

Until further notice the placement in print and broadcasting of all kinds of materials – including reprints – related to the fighting units of the Leningrad Military District in their struggle with the White Finns is PROHIBITED.⁷⁵

TASS's dominant role was established by the stipulation that only material issued by their offices, and those of the Leningrad Military District, were authorized for distribution. Such an order seems like an afterthought in the context of the self-censorship that was already beginning to limit the presence of the war in the press. This inability to react quickly in a period of intense crisis not only reflects the relative weakness of the Party machinery, but also resulted in an extended period of time taken to formulate and distribute orders from the centre. Delays were inevitable when those signals were overly reliant on Stalin's sporadic personal intervention.

TASS had thus become the only significant source of news on the war well before Glavlit circulated any official guidelines regarding censorship. Stalin continued to keep a watchful eye over incoming foreign press reports, although instances of his direct intervention in their publication decreased. The regime was running out of options until, at last, after nearly two and a half months of fighting, it achieved a desperately needed military breakthrough. This required a serious shake-up of the military high command, placing Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko in overall charge of the final offensive on Finnish defences and launching a collective weight of men, machines, and firepower that had not been seen since the Western Front in 1918.⁷⁶ The 'everlasting glory' anticipated with victory in this campaign was illusory.⁷⁷ The scale of casualties, and the protracted nature of fighting, which

⁷³ RGASPI, fol. 17, op. 125, d. 1-8.

⁷⁴ Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs at the RSFSR Narkompros

⁷⁵ GARF, fol. 9425, op. 1, d. 16, l. 19.

⁷⁶ Nikolai Tolstoy, *Stalin's Secret War* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1981), p. 147.

⁷⁷ Dimitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. by Harold Shukman (New York: Prima Publishing, 1991), p. 365.

continued until peace was eventually signed a month later, meant that little would be salvaged from the war that could present the Red Army in a positive light.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Without positive spin to offer the reader, TASS had emerged as a channel of information to counter the prevalence of bad news from the front. The scouring of foreign newspapers for Soviet-friendly print, while simultaneously censoring negative press proved an imperfect fix. This was a result of limited resources and the breaks in communication that it suffered between Moscow and its offices abroad. It was exacerbated by an inherent weakness in the propaganda state's position and limited strategies at its disposal for responding to such rapidly changing events.

Stalin's personal intervention in everything from the opening of diplomatic talks, to the manipulation of foreign news in *Pravda* was not an effective strategy for controlling the day-to-day presentation of the war to the public. Face-to-face consultation with Stalin's subordinates unfortunately limits our insights into the dialogue surrounding this process. It is clear that early attempts at fabricating the truth – such as Molotov's denial of civilian bombing casualties in Helsinki – only bred scepticism. Moreover, when facts could not be supported with evidence, foreign condemnation of the Soviet position remained widespread.⁷⁹ Surprisingly the regime felt compelled to air this negative press periodically (perhaps in an attempt to appear objective). More importantly, the regime was acutely aware of the range of opinions concerning Finnish affairs – both healthy and unhealthy – within Soviet society. Thus the lies and slander of the foreign press were publicly renounced, and simultaneously the regime continued to engage in its own freedom with the truth.⁸⁰

Despite these failures, the study of this period has still proven invaluable for revealing the prominence of TASS in Soviet affairs. The need for a suitable replacement for the dwindling Comintern suggests that a more in-depth history of the Telegraph Agency should be incorporated into our understanding of the Soviet system both before and after World War II. The value that the regime placed on TASS's collation and strict channelling of information mirrors a recent study of the Stalinist surveillance system. There are clear parallels in how both of these institutions formed part of a cult of information for Stalin and his inner circle. From inside and outside the borders of the Soviet Union, they strove to monopolize information in all forms. It was driven by 'an overarching principle that guided the

⁷⁸ For a more detailed treatment of the war and its aftermath in the Soviet press, see: Malcolm Spencer, 'Stalinism and the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-40: Crisis management, Censorship and Control', MPhil Thesis (University of Oxford: 2011).

⁷⁹ 'Molotov's Denial of Civilian Bombings' <<http://www.histdoc.net/history/bombard1939.html>> [accessed 11 April 2011]. Even those loyal communists among the CPGB leadership, while publicly embracing this rhetoric, privately admitted that 'it may be true that some people have been killed and some buildings bombed'. Labour History Archive, CP/IND/MONT/18/01 (Montague).

⁸⁰ 'Repudiation by the Headquarters of the Leningrad Military District, 14 January 1940' <<http://www.histdoc.net/history/NKID1940-01-14.html>> [accessed 12 April 2011]. Published in *Pravda*, 14 Jan. 1940.

entire system: working toward the *Vozhd* (Leader).⁸¹ Khavinson and his staff found themselves rapidly assimilated into that system during the war.

After the conflict with Finland, three key developments can be traced. First, the expansion of the number and localities of its agents abroad increased significantly from 1939-40. This included the increase of staff at London and New York, alongside the newly established correspondents in major capitals around the world. The new intake included the penetration of new and established bureaus with native Soviet operatives, reminiscent of Khavinson's earlier calls for change in 1937.⁸² Second, the expansion was carefully monitored by the state security services of the NKVD. Its entire nomenklatura now operated under the watchful eye of Lavrentii Beria. Careful attention was paid to the sensitive and potentially counter-revolutionary information that passed through its offices, which included a carefully defined 'secret section'.⁸³ Finally, in May 1940 the task of reorganising TASS and the channels through which its information network operated was given to one of Stalin's closest associates, Andrei Zhdanov. As Leningrad Party Chief, he had been responsible for mobilizing the city's military and industrial capacity for war with Finland. Now he was well placed to recognize the value of TASS in the regimes future propaganda efforts. His reforms were geared toward streamlining the distribution of foreign intelligence via the creation of a new 'Bureau of Internal Information'. Stalin's concern with maintaining a strict monopoly over all such conduits of knowledge suggests that this restructuring was focused on ensuring tight control of information and its continued exploitation for the benefit of the Party.⁸⁴

Through widespread surveillance of both the army and the civilian population, obvious breaks with the official line had been prominent in popular opinion related to Soviet-Finnish affairs.⁸⁵ Lessons had to be learned, not only how to wage war but also how to portray it. Khavinson wrote to Durant in New York seeking ideas of how to manipulate public support for the fighting in Europe. There is potential for future research, exploring the extent to which lessons learned from this conflict were applied in time for Hitler's invasion on 22 June 1941.⁸⁶ As German forces bore down on the capital, the Kremlin was again in crisis mode and in desperate need of material to stem the tide of negative public opinion.

19 October 1941. Khavinson called from Moscow tonight. Reported on the situation, the order by the State Committee for Defence and so on. Moscow is mobilized for defence.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, 'Getting to Know You: The Soviet Surveillance System, 1939-57', *Kritika*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2012), p. 39.

⁸² GARF, fol. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, ll. 231-233.

⁸³ GARF, fol. 4459, op. 38, d. 104, ll. 1-5, 235-239.

⁸⁴ RGASPI, fol. 77, op. 4, d. 13, ll. 84-104.

⁸⁵ See, for example: *Zimniaia Voina: Issledovaniia, Dokumenty, Kommentarii*, pp. 207-210; and RGASPI, fol. 77, op. 4, d. 46, ll. 12-24. Public opinion related to the war and the implications for the regime are treated in more detail in, Spencer, 'Stalinism and the Soviet-Finnish War', pp. 27-38.

⁸⁶ See, for example: A. Y. Livshin and I. B. Orlov, *Sovetskaya Propaganda v Gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny: «Kommunikatsiia Ubezhdeniia» i Mobilizatsionnye Mehanizmy* (Moscow: 2007).

⁸⁷ *Diary of Dimitrov*, p. 201.

As Dimitrov's diary testifies, with the stakes even higher, Khavinson would once again be called upon – this time to ensure that the Soviet propaganda machine was armed with ammunition to repel the fascist advance.

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